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Case Study

Indigenous Perspectives: The Post-Conflict Landscapes of Rwanda

Killian Doherty

This research traces conflict through competing claims to Rwanda's landscapes. Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in sub-saharan Africa, and its terrain of hills and valleys and its temperate climate made it favourable for settlers that utilised them in diverse ways. Pastoralists acquired highland plateaus for the farming of cows, and as territory increased so did power.¹ Agronomists farmed hill-sides, while hunter-gatherer communities inhabited highland forests and low-lying wetlands. Power, class and social rank in Rwanda remain deeply inscribed in these territorial arrangements that permitted access to resources, in turn contributing to the 1994 genocide.²

Today Rwanda is the most densely populated country in sub-Saharan Africa.³ Human settlements nestle within a hilly network of forest, marshland, rivers and lakes. Land insecurity is rife, and the returning diaspora continue to re-settle in Kigali, the capital, with a population of 1.22 million set to triple by 2040.⁴ Rwanda's redevelopment hinges upon the relations between land, resources and settlement, yet dominant forms of urban planning and architecture suggest otherwise.

Kigali is replete with generic high-rise buildings, sitting within inner city zoned land once occupied by low-income wetland communities.⁵ Land reform policies consolidate rural settlements into 'model villages', as natural resources are monetised through tourism, energy and collective agricultural projects.⁶ [Fig. 1] With relations between human

settlements and land strained, livelihoods are undermined. It is the hunter-gatherer Twa who have suffered most from the supposed benefits of development.

Approximately 30,000 Twa reside across Rwanda in the worst socio-economic conditions of the national population.⁷ Climate change, conservation and gorilla protection policies have forced Twa communities off their ancestral lands. In 2011 a Rwandan government project demolished temporary displaced Twa grass-roofed homes; built from materials that are today forbidden.⁸ Twa communities today are forcefully 'reintegrated' into Rwandan society through 'modern' generic homes sited on government reservations. According to UN Reports on racial discrimination, post-war Rwanda does not in practice permit the same rights of access to housing, jobs, education and land for the Twa. As a result the Twa population is in decline.⁹

The political scientist Peter Uvin regards western development as a factor that reinforced Rwanda's internal colonialism, enacted through structural and direct violence.¹⁰ Structural violence takes an indirect form through physical and physiological exclusion manifesting as poverty, hunger and marginalisation from society.¹¹ Direct violence needs little explanation in the Rwandan context. Uvin asserts that the privileging of one elite ethnic group through political and economic processes of development in Rwanda, legitimises one group's claims to sovereignty over another, aiding control of

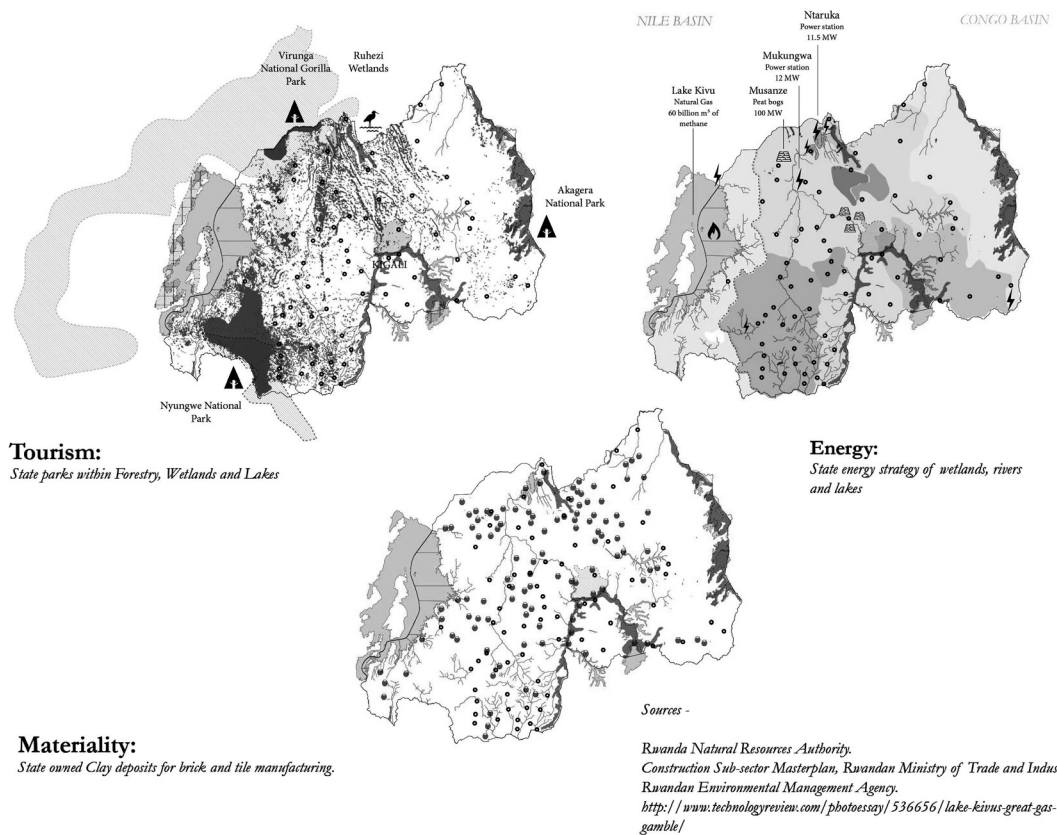


Fig. 1: Resources relative to areas inhabited by Twa, © Killian Doherty.

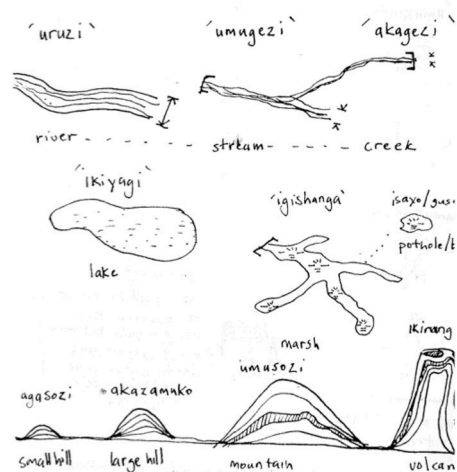


Fig. 2: Indigenous value mapping, © Killian Doherty.

land and natural resources therein.¹² Development in Rwanda, Uvin fears, operates through a 'narrow economic-technical approach', therefore neglecting the non-economic interests and overlooking 'human rights violations, income inequality, authoritarianism, humiliation and fear'.¹³ To neglect the non-economic in Rwanda is to overlook the relations between settlement practices and the landscape that defines 90 percent of the population's livelihood. Bruno Latour refers to the division arising between the human/cultural and the non-human/natural world as 'the constitution of modernity'; an understanding he claims is deepened through anthropology.¹⁴

In 2014 I began to communicate with Twa communities regarding their displacement, land-poverty and forced reintegration. Using hand-drawn maps and a three-dimensional landscape model, sites of cultural importance were documented by hand and inputted into a GIS database. [Fig. 2] The dominant representations of the Virunga forests within government maps illustrate them as an uninhabited, vacant and static space. The Twa however map the forests as a dwelling of relations through sites of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being, with movement criss-crossing the frontiers of Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC, irrespective of official claims to sovereignty.

Yet the unrelenting script of national unity and societal prosperity that development embodies, imposes the paradigm of the new 'modern' house upon the Twa, as an unspoken evolutionary gain. However without access to land and customary rights the new home signifies a loss; sedentary structures are for indigenous communities material non-sequiturs.¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu considers the reorganisation of the dwelling space a means to achieve 'a new framework of existence'.¹⁶ Rehousing and resettlement in Rwanda manifests as a pretense to eradicating ethnic differences, yet regaining control of the landscape's economic potential.

Exposure to the Twa's non-western, non-dualist perspectives have challenged my own western conventions of scale and the temporality of dwelling and the landscape itself. Design interventions, if they occur at all, must therefore be multi-scalar, connecting the political scale of the constrained dwelling to the environmental scale of the increasingly delimited cultural landscape.

Ethnic difference remains absent within the discourse of democracy, unity and development in Rwanda. As social architecture in Rwanda flourishes primarily by western firms aligned with development intentions, it cannot engage directly with political matters of social justice and human rights violations.¹⁷ Circumnavigating this paralysis anthropology, sociology and political economy are used to examine the contradictions that resound within the built spaces of development, to articulate a spatial voice conceived from difference. This research aims to explore this through mediation between the Twa's dual perspective of dwelling, as violently constrained and potentially boundless within the forests.

Notes

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1. As Tutsis amassed sizable amounts of cattle, land was acquired through systems of patrimony. Hutu farmers who served under monarchs paid taxes and/or contributed unpaid labour.
2. Herman Musahara and Christopher Huggins, 'Land Reform, Land Scarcity and Post Conflict Reconstruction. A Case Study of Rwanda', *Eco-Conflicts* 3 no. 3 (2004): 269–346.

3. With a population of 10.6 million and density of 430 people per sq/km.
4. Killian Doherty, 'Contemporary Architecture in East Africa: An Empire of Good Practice or Shadows of Neocolonialism?', in Andres B. Lepik, ed., *Afritecture: building social change* (Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2013): 248–253.
5. 'Poor Kiyovu', a former low-income neighbourhood in central Kigali is now a 'heritage residential neighbourhood'; it was re-zoned by the Rwanda Development Board to make way for new commercial developments.
6. This includes national hydroelectric projects within Northern Rwanda that have commandeered the country's largest wetlands. Tourism in Rwanda accounts for 46 percent of the GDP with the Virunga Mountain Gorilla being the largest attraction. The nationwide Crop Intensification Programme controls, through mono-cropping, what is grown across public and private sector farming in Rwanda at all levels.
7. Jerome Lewis, *The Twa Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2000).
8. Ministry of Local Government, 'MinaLoc Bye Bye Nyakatsi programme', (Minaloc, 2011), <http://www.minaloc.gov.rw>.
9. United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 'International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* CERD/C/ RWA (June 2016): 1–7. <http://docstore.ohchr.org/>.
10. Peter Uvin, 'Development Aid and Structural Violence: The Case of Rwanda.' *Development* 42, no. 3 (1999): 49–56.
11. Ibid., 49.
12. Ibid., 54.
13. Ibid., 55.
14. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
15. Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros, 'This Is Not a Pipe: The Treacheries of Indigenous Housing', *Public Culture*, 22 no. 1 (2010): 187.
16. Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad, *Le*

déracinement. La crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie (Paris : Les editions des minuit, 1964).

17. For examples see the work of USA based firms MASS Architects and Sharon Davis Design.

Biography

Killian Doherty is an architect who has practiced in New Orleans, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda and runs a collaborative practice 'Architectural Field Office', that has a particular interest in sites of conflict, and the dissonance of modernity and development in Africa. He has written for the Architectural Review, Mascontext and VOLUME magazine on these themes. He currently is undertaking a PhD by Design at the Bartlett School of Architecture. For more see www.architecturalfieldoffice.org.

